

Swimming against the current

Olympic star managed to stay clean when East Germany and doping went hand in hand.

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Column By Karin Helmstaedt

He hasn't lost any of the charm of which journalists wrote volumes back in the 1970s.

Canadian journalist Doug Gilbert once described East Germany's Roland Matthes as having a "playboy image," as someone "you might expect to see in the company of movie stars, fashion models and the rest of the 'beautiful people.'" While Matthes himself might find that a bit over the top, at 56, he's the same tall, fit and handsome man he always was – just a little greyer.

When I ask him to tell me about swimming, the sport that made him a hero beyond comparison, he responds with none of that vibrancy. "Actually, it's all a closed chapter for me," he says. When I ask why, he puts his disillusionment on the table.

"It's disturbing to see what elite sport has become, the kind of people who are involved, with their so-called know-how ... it's no fun to be involved in that kind of thing anymore."

The athletes, he says, "are more or less the same, but they have completely different values.

"When I think back to how it used to be, we were full of enthusiasm, always wanting to experience new things. These days, most athletes aren't in it to learn anything new, or even to test themselves to the best of their abilities. For most of them, it's all about money, and that's where the question of doping is never far away."

This from a man who came through the East German sport system, by all accounts, uncorrupted and unscathed, but it's a perspective that's been hard wrought. British swim journalist Pat Besford once baptized him the "Rolls Royce" of swimming. According to those who saw him swim, Matthes backstroked over the water, dominating his disciplines, the 100- and 200-metre events, for the best part of a decade.

A four-time Olympic champion, he set a total of 19 world and 29 European records during the course of his incredible career. Between 1967 and 1975 he was named GDR athlete of the year an unprecedented seven times. A fellow competitor once remarked that if it weren't for the dive at the start of the race, "Matthes wouldn't even get his suit wet."

At the same time, he managed another miracle: to avoid the East Germany's state-ordered doping program and, amazingly, to avoid even noticing it was happening around him.

Obviously, from his perspective, this can also be filed under achievements.

The miracle worker was Marlies Grohe, and Matthes gives her all the credit. The Erfurt coach who took him under her wing at age 11 was the one who could read the rambunctious, headstrong kid who was wont to shirk authority and rules. She was the one who recognized his talent.

“I was pretty difficult,” Matthes admits, then explains how Grohe wheedled quality work out of him with get-out swims and cake-eating contests, and how she later knew when to let him off when he was overtired.

“She always said plans are there to be changed,” he recalls fondly, and, indeed, Grohe not only changed prescribed training plans to suit his needs and personality, she steadfastly refused to expose him to UM, or “supporting means,” the euphemistic name given to East Germany’s steroid of choice.

Matthes says he was finally able to talk to her about the issue shortly before her death in 1990. Grohe was a solid, round and portly woman, and he says it was by virtue of her sheer mass that she managed to stand her ground against the East German authorities. As fiercely as a mother, she protected him and helped him forge an independent mind.

He says it with a hint of a smile, but he’s deadly serious because if Matthes came off for the outside world as the only East German swim star blessed with a certain benevolence from the state, the incorruptible hero, it wasn’t without cost to Grohe.

“I had the talent, of course, to merit being left alone,” he says, but he admits that, just as she was his guardian angel, he was her ticket – a perfect symbiosis.

As one of the few women on the international deck, Grohe had a hard time with her cohorts. She was repeatedly mobbed and pressured and, ultimately, not always the winner.

When Matthes decided, after successfully defending his Olympic titles in 1972, that he had had enough, she was called in by sport officials for a meeting. When she emerged she had tears in her eyes, and said to him, “It’s time for you to think about reversing your decision.”

They had made it clear that in addition to other inconveniences, his university studies would be compromised if he were to quit.

“I’d never seen her like that,” he says. Matthes swam until 1976, but the pressure was on for both of them.

By the time he did end his career – 30 years ago, after winning bronze in the 100 back at the Montreal Olympics – he was 26 and wiser to the world.

“I was lucky,” he says, “because eight weeks before the Games, I’d had to have my appendix out. My coach organized the whole thing for me with a doctor she knew – he tied the incision specially so that it would hold when I got back in the water. And, at 26, I was already an old man in those days. It was a relief to still be in the race – and the bronze was a blessing.”

While he could always pull a fast one in the pool, the retired hero wasn’t prepared for the hurdles to come. By the 76 Games, he was an item with Kornelia Ender, the Amazonian swim star who led East Germany’s incredible sweep of the women’s events – 11 of 13 – and in early 1978 the

couple married. With eight Olympic gold medals between them, it was a power-packed union, prompting rumours in the international press that the wedding had been programmed by the state to breed super-swimmers. "The truth of it is, we got married because she got pregnant," Matthes said. "As simple as that. I felt I had a responsibility."

Everyone, including his coach, disapproved, and even higher officials such as GDR sport bigwig Manfred Ewald tried to talk him out of it, claiming the two were not compatible. "I guess the whole thing put them under great pressure because from the outside it did look arranged."

Daughter Francesca was born in the fall of 1978, but the marriage was a disaster, lasting barely four years.

It was when he wanted a divorce that Matthes found himself up against Orwellian forces. After the 1972 Olympics, he had been rewarded with a house by an Erfurt communist party official who fawned over his achievements. When the official got wind of the pending divorce, he said: no way. Matthes paid no heed and was promptly kicked out of his house and told he was unfit for society.

"You're 'Vogelfrei!'" was the incensed official's threat, meaning it was open season, we're no longer looking out for you. The hunting metaphor was apt, and since the official was in fact a hunting buddy of Erich Honecker, the East German dictator, Matthes was advised not to bother complaining higher up.

The hero's star had fallen. For the next half a year, Matthes slept on his mother's couch, as there was no apartment available right away. Suddenly, he was without privileges. Doors were closed in his face, invitations denied. He did manage to continue his studies in medicine – "that gave me my focus" – and he says the people at the faculty were fair to him.

During that time, he was supported by a few friends and by his former coach, Grohe, "but she couldn't do much to help me anymore because I was no longer in her charge," he says. Slowly, he rebuilt his life, graduated, married a second time, and then, in 1982, Ewald gave him a "break" and recruited him to the IOC medical commission.

What did that involve?

"I always wondered that myself," he laughs. Apart from going to a few meetings, the posting was a purely political move, but he claims it was during this time that the scope of his homeland's drug program became clear to him.

"Even then I had no idea it was so widespread," he says. "I thought it was something they did in Berlin, seeing as the Berlin athletes more or less trounced the rest of the country. I thought it was reserved for the Stasi club Dynamo, their privilege, so to speak, but when I discovered how widespread it really was, I was shocked."

Didn't he ever wonder at Ender's appearance, at her quick transformation after she quit the sport?

"It might sound stupid now," he says, "but when you spend that much time in the company of girls who look like that, you find it normal. I saw many examples of masculine women, and when you spend enough time cordoned off with a small group of people, training morning, noon and night, well ... after a while, you're bound to find one of them attractive."

Matthes describes the cynicism that reigned on the medical commission when it came to the secret of East Germany's success.

"Of course it was talked about, after three whiskeys, but then it was simply not an issue the next

day. Whether it was the Norwegians, or the Irish, or whoever else was on that commission, they simply let it go.”

A frightening disclosure when one considers how many athletes on both sides were duped – chastised even, for voicing suspicions – while those with the medical know-how deliberately looked away.

He remembers the final straw when, at the GDR sports awards in 1984, an endocrinological research institute in Leipzig was honoured for its contributions.

“They were that arrogant, that shameless about it,” he says, adding that his time on the commission was up. “I couldn’t go along with something like that.”

As a doctor, today, Matthes shudders to think of the entire operation.

“To think I used to wonder how a tiny country with 17 million people could be No. 2 in the world. The meticulousness with which they went about it all – on the one hand, this incredible training methodology, a scientific foundation that I still maintain is the best there is; and on the other, how shamelessly they used human beings to win their laurels, without any idea where it was going, what consequences it would have. The athletes were guinea pigs, and it was all a great experiment.”

It had taken a while, but Matthes did feel used.

The bitterness didn’t stop there. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, he was in for the next shock. Any remaining adulation turned to animosity, and suddenly he was ostracized within the community as one of the former privileged, one of those who had frittered away all the state’s money.

“It was like a sort of witch hunt,” he recalls. “For years, you’re a so-called diplomat in a training suit, you do your best to bring glory to the nation, and then you’re nothing at all.

“That was when I decided I wouldn’t grow old in the East.”

Matthes packed up his family and moved to western Germany. Eventually, he settled in Marktheidenfeld, near Würzburg, where he runs an orthopedic practice. Over the years, he has kept abreast of events in the swimming world, even doing some commentating for German television in 1998, but high-performance sport is not something he feels inclined to encourage.

Happily married to his third wife, sport is something he does for fun with his seven-year-old son. Occasionally, he’s called to receive an award for lifetime achievement, but when his son asked him recently about his Olympic medals, he said he had no idea where they were.

It’s uncomfortable and sadly ironic, to review this biography against the grim backdrop of sport in Germany today. Ironic that officials in 2007, in the wake of one drug scandal after another, are still deliberating over the necessity of an anti-doping law.

It’s high time, given this country’s track record. Because even if officials typically prefer to look away and heroes don’t talk that much, this is one chapter that will never be definitively closed.

Former Kingston Blue Marlins swimmer Karin Helmstaedt is an award-winning freelance journalist and television news anchor in Berlin. Last night, she was inducted into the Kingston and District Sports Hall of Fame.